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# The dread of terrorism

Before the Reagan administration goes lurching into an antiterrorism blitz, it would be good to know just exactly the kind of activities it has in mind. So far, all the public knows is that the secretary of state has made a suitably tough-talking speech about using "preventive or pre-emptive action" against state-supported terrorism and that the President has signed a secret directive on the subject. Add to this the measures taken to increase security at various government buildings in Washington and it is enough to give you the willies.

The aim is said to be the protection of Americans at home and abroad from terrorist attack. And that is a mighty worthy object. But let's not forget the possibility that intelligence agencies might overestimate the risks and be overzealous in countering them. Nobody in intelligence work loses points for warning about a danger that does not materialize, but pity the man who does not see the punch coming.

Now, perhaps the administration really has nothing more in mind than strengthening the cooperation with allied governments in charting the movements of known terrorists. Maybe the preventive action rhetoric is merely meant to make potential bombthrowers think that somebody might be there to take out the fuse. Or perhaps this is nothing more than another election year program to project a forceful presidential image.

But it is also possible that the administration has fundamentally changed the rules under which the intelligence agencies operate in this field. And if that is so, then there must be more to go on than what has been made public so far.

It isn't as if this country lacks experience in the way secret programs to protect against real and imagined national security threats can go awry. The procedural safeguards put into place after the Nixon years represented a fairly solid consensus about how to balance the need to protect against foreign threats with the need to protect Americans' freedom. The Reagan administration has never been comfortable with those rules, and that is why the inexplicit reports of the new antiterrorist campaign sound an alarm.

The most sensitive element in a program of this sort is its domestic component, and it deserves the greatest public disclosure and scrutiny. What kind of preventive action within the United States is the administration contemplating? Under what kinds of standards and controls? Who is going to be in charge? Why does there have to be a special provision when the tools for counteracting political violence are already available under existing laws and regulations?

Terrorism is a dreadful excrescence of contemporary life, but fear of it should not be allowed to overwhelm all critical faculties.